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Passives and Antipassives in K'iche'

The Functions of Passives and Antipassives in K'iche' Mayan

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Abstract

Passive constructions present a special challenge for functional theories of language acquisition. This paper outlines some of the problems functionalist theories face in explaining the structure and acquisition of the nonactive voices in the Mayan language K'iche'. Only theories with both structural and functional components can hope to explain children's ability to acquire language.

## The Functions of Passives and Antipassives in K'iche' Mayan\*

Passive constructions present a challenge for any theory of language acquisition. It would be easy to explain how children acquire language if language was simply a 1-1 mapping from a semantic or functional base to syntactic structure. Children could assume that agents would always be subjects and patients would always be objects. The existence of passive constructions proves that a single, direct mapping between semantic/functional and grammatical relations is not necessary for children to learn a language. This is because the patient in passive sentences becomes the grammatical subject. Children cannot acquire most adult languages if they remain content with a direct mapping between agents and subjects or patients and objects.

Passive sentences pose a particularly difficult challenge for functionalist explanations of language acquisition. There are almost as many varieties of functionalist accounts of language and language acquisition as authors. They range from the linguistically oriented (Bresnan 1978; Foley & Van Valin 1984) to the psychologically oriented (Bates & MacWhinney 1979; Karmiloff-Smith 1979; Slobin 1985). To some extent all linguistic theories, including Chomsky's (1981) incorporate a functional, semantic-pragmatic level of representation. In this paper I will be exclusively concerned with those functionalist theories which do not recognize an autonomous level of structural form (Bates & MacWhinney 1979 being an extreme example of this type). Many functionalist theories don't even address the formal level of

syntactic representation (e.g. Hopper 1987, Karmiloff-Smith 1979). My critique applies to these theories as well to the extent that they assume a purely functional base will explain the structural regularities and acquisition of the entire adult grammar.

The problem of passives would not be insurmountable if children had some means of distinguishing between active and passive sentences. One possibility is that passive sentences are functionally distinct from active sentences. A common belief is that passive sentences provide a means of focusing on or topicalizing patients while active sentences are more neutral or focus more on agents (Foley & Van Valin 1984, and by extension Bates & MacWhinney 1979). Children could use such a functional dichotomy to suspend the agent = subject rule in order to acquire the passive. Presumably, positive evidence would be available from the linguistic and nonlinguistic context to indicate the functional difference between active and passive sentences.

While this scenario has a certain plausibility it does not stand close examination. One problem is that the semantic relations agent and patient are not explicitly defined. The prototypical agent which voluntarily initiates an action does not apply to many verbs, e.g. follow, see, want, remember, and orbit. English allows speakers to focus on the subjects and objects of these verbs as well as on the subjects and objects of more prototypical transitive action verbs (kill, break, hit). A functionalist would have to explain why grammatical operations apply in an across-the-board fashion rather than to just a special class of transitive action verbs.

A second problem with the functionalist account of the passive is that focus is not defined explicitly. Without a well-defined notion of sentence focus there is no functional explanation of passives. A functionalist account of passives would have to stipulate exactly how children could discover which part of a sentence received focus in any context. A related problem is that languages have other means of focusing on objects besides passives. Word order and intonation are two devices in general use. If children assumed agent focus sentences were active and object focus sentences were passive they would construct a false distinction for languages that used word order or intonation rather than voice alternations as focusing devices.

A final problem is that languages do not use passives exclusively to focus on object nps. Passives in many languages serve a variety of functions. Thai and Japanese passives, for example, indicate that the subject has suffered in some way from the action. This makes possible the famous Japanese passive "I was died by my son." Children would have to be equipped with as many different functions as there are passives in the world's languages. They would also have to be able to tell the difference between an adversative passive, a focus passive, an aspectual passive, and a disambiguating passive to name only a few. These passives have similar structural properties (an underlying object is promoted to a grammatical subject), but functionalist theories would treat them as separate rules whose structural similarities are mere accidents.

In the rest of this paper I will concentrate on the nonactive constructions in K'iche', a Mayan language spoken by 1.5 million

people in the western highlands of Guatemala. There is an extensive literature treating active and nonactive sentences in K'iche' and other Mayan languages from a functionalist perspective. After outlining the functional description of voice alternation in K'iche', I will address the issue of whether a functionalist treatment provides an adequate explanation of voice acquisition in this language.

K'iche' is an example of a pure head-marking language (Nichols 1986) which contains an ergative system of cross-referencing argument functions on the verb. A sample conjugational paradigm for transitive and intransitive verbs in K'iche' is shown in (1).

- (1) k-in-a-q'alu:j      'You hug me'  
       k-0-a-q'alu:j      'You hug him'  
       k-at-u-q'alu:j     'He hugs you'
- k-in-pe:tik        'I'm coming'  
       k-at-pe:tik        'You're coming'  
       k-0-pe:tik        'He's coming'

The extensive system of cross-referencing licenses the absence of pronouns in subject and object position (and elsewhere). K'iche' speakers only use independent pronouns for emphasis or contrast. Thus, the use of independent pronouns is one device K'iche' speakers may call upon to focus on a particular entity. K'iche' clauses with transitive verbs seldom contain a subject noun phrase. My count showed that 14% of sentences with transitive verbs in a K'iche' text contained subjects. Du Bois (1987) states the 6% of sentences with

transitive verbs in the closely related language Sacapultec contain subjects. K'iche' children use overt subjects with transitive verbs at roughly the same frequency as adult speakers or three times less frequently than children acquiring English.

K'iche' has two forms of passive and antipassive voices in addition to the active voice. The two forms of the K'iche' passive are similar to the English passive in that they promote an underlying object to the subject position and optionally allow the underlying subject to be expressed in an oblique phrase. One of the K'iche' passives (or 'passive1' as Mondloch 1981 refers to it) is restricted to underlying subject NPs in the third person. This passive cannot be used with underlying subjects in the first or second person. Grammatical and ungrammatical examples of this passive are shown in (2).

(2) a. k-0-q'alu:-x            ri: ak'al r-uma:l    ri: u-na:n  
 IMPERF-3A-hug-PASS1 the child 3E-cause the 3E-mother  
 'The child is being hugged by his/her mother.'

b. \* k-0-q'alu:-x            ri: ak'al w-uma:l  
 IMPERF-3A-hug-PASS1 the child 1E-cause  
 'The child is being hugged by me.'

Mondloch (1978) and others have observed that passive1 is used to distinguish between a third person subject and object. The active form of the sentence in (2) is ambiguous; there is no unambiguous indicator of the subject. Even changing the word order does not

affect a speaker's ability to distinguish the subject. The sentences in (3) can all mean the child is hugging his/her mother or his/her mother is hugging the child. The only difference between them is that the np in preverbal position is in focus. K'iche' speakers use such sentences when the subject is apparent from previous discourse or the nonlinguistic context. This is an excellent example of the way languages may separate focus from other grammatical functions. Passive1 provides a means of unambiguously describing events involving two third person antagonists. It is only secondarily used to focus on object nps.

- (3) a. k-0-u:-q'aluj      ri: ak'al      ri: u-na:n  
          hug                      child                      his/her-mother
- b. ri: ak'al      k-0-u:-q'aluj      ri: u-na:n
- c. ri: u-na:n      k-0-u:-q'aluj      ri: ak'al

The second passive in K'iche' (passive2) primarily serves an aspectual function. It can be used to express either the successful completion of an action or the fact that an action can be carried out successfully. An example of passive2 is shown in (4). As (4) demonstrates K'iche' sentences in passive2 are acceptable with first and second person oblique agents. Passive2 also serves to distinguish between two third person participants.



- (4) k-0-q'alu-taj            ri: ak'al aw-uma:l  
 IMPERF-3A-hug-PASS2 the child 2E-cause  
 'The child can be hugged by you.'

K'iche' has two distinct forms of antipassive as well as passive voices. Antipassive voices are used to focus on the subject or action. The object is sometimes demoted to an oblique phrase. Like passives, antipassives convert transitive verbs to intransitive verbs. One consequence is that antipassive verbs, like passives, only allow the absolutive set of cross-referencing affixes to appear on the verb.

The focus antipassive is one of the more obscure constructions in K'iche'. It is used when an underlying subject is moved to the focus position in front of the verb. This occurs in questions, relative clauses and sentence clefts. Examples of all three of these constructions appear in (5).

- (5) a. jachin x-0-q'alu-n            ri: ak'al  
 who    PERF-3A-hug-FOC\_AP the child  
 'Who hugged the child?'
- b. utz ri: winaq (ri:) k-e:-q'alu-n            ri: ak'al  
 good the people (who) IMPERF-6A-hug-FOC\_AP the child  
 'The people who hug the child are good.'
- c. are: ri: ak'al k-at-q'alu-n-ik  
 focus the child IMPERF-2A-hug-FOC\_AP-TERM  
 'It is the child who is hugging you.'

There are no limitations on which verbs can appear in the focus antipassive, however either the subject or the object must be a third person np. As the example in (5c) shows, the verb agrees with whichever np is highest on an animacy hierarchy. If neither the subject or the object is a third person np then the active voice is used. This shows that the primary function of the focus antipassive is to distinguish between two third person nps in the context of questions, relative clauses and clefts. The focus antipassive cannot be used if the subject and possessor of the object have the same referent. In such situations K'iche' speakers use the regular active voice, see (6).

(6) a. \* are: ri: at x-at-q'alu-n ri: aw-alk'uwa'al  
 focus the you PERF-2A-hug-FOC\_AP the 2E-children  
 'It was you who hugged your children.'

b. are: ri: at x-e:-a-q'alu-j ri: aw-alk'uwa'al  
 focus the you PERF-6A-2E-hug-TERM the 2E-children  
 'It was you who hugged your children.'

The second antipassive construction in K'iche', the absolutive antipassive, is also productive in the language, but there are a number of transitive verbs which do not have absolutive forms (for example, -esa:j 'to take out', -il 'to see' -cha:ji:j 'to take care of', -woq'e:j 'to cry over'). A number of other verbs seem to appear almost exclusively in the absolutive, e.g. -yaja-n 'to scold', -tzijo-n 'to talk', and -chaku-n 'to work'. These verbs also

demonstrate that the K'iche' absolutive voice is not equivalent to the conative construction (e.g. cut at) which Guerssel et al. (1985) claim only applies to verbs whose conceptual structure contains an effect clause and a contact clause. In absolutive constructions the direct object np may optionally be expressed in an oblique phrase headed by a preposition, see (7). The absolutive can be used with two nonthird person nps.

- (7) k-in-yoq'-on (che: le: in-ta:t) [from Mondloch 1981]  
 IMPERF-1A-mock-ABS (at the 1E-father)  
 'I mock (at my father).'

Mondloch (1981:186) states that one function of the absolutive voice is "to delete or demote an indefinite, obvious or insignificant transitive object." It can also be used to distinguish between a third person subject and object.

This strange language stuff may be difficult to understand, but the main point is that the extensive cross-referencing system on the K'iche' verb fails to distinguish between a third person subject and object. In such cases, K'iche' speakers may use a passive or antipassive construction. In fact passivel and the focus antipassive construction are limited to contexts where the active verb would be ambiguous. The focus properties of the passive and antipassive constructions are secondary. K'iche' speakers use word order and pronouns as the primary focusing devices. The grammatical relations of subject and object in K'iche' are relatively independent of focus or topicalization functions.

I cannot see how functionalist theories would make any testable predictions about the K'iche' voice types. In the rest of this paper I will point out some difficulties I found in attempting to develop such an account.

One problem is that the nonactive voices in K'iche' do not have the same function as their English counterparts. A perspective which emphasizes a similarity of function over form cannot predict how children acquire forms that serve different functions. In fact, it seems unreasonable in a functionalist theory even to compare the acquisition of passives in English and K'iche'. It would probably be more legitimate to compare the children's use of passive in English with the K'iche' children's use of variable word order and emphatic pronouns. Ultimately, functionalist theories do not permit very explicit hypotheses because no one knows any precise way of stating the functions of language independently of the forms which encode them. I cannot tell whether any K'iche' form serves the exact function that passives play in English. I find it extremely unsettling to have a theory which claims it is illegitimate to compare English and K'iche' passives.

For the sake of argument, however, I will ignore this problem and ask how the English and K'iche' passives compare. Bresnan (1982) and Wasow (1978) argue that English actually contains two distinct types of passive rules. One operates at the syntactic level while the other operates at the lexical level. The lexical rule creates adjectival forms that may then undergo un- prefixation while the syntactic

operation does not change the lexical category and, as a result, does not feed the rule of un- prefixation. The only way a functionalist theory has of explaining this distinction is to assume that the two rules serve different functions. A functionalist theory cannot explain why one rule would have more exceptions than the other.

Will Norman (1978) has argued that the two K'iche' passives may also be distinguished by assuming they result from the operation of rules on the syntactic and lexical levels. He argues that passive1 is a syntactic rule while passive2 is lexical. Recall that passive2 adds its own aspectual meaning to the construction. It also changes the meaning of some verbs unpredictably and interacts with other rules in a way that is best explained by assuming it operates in the lexical component.

This raises an intriguing question of how the acquisition of lexical and syntactic passives in K'iche' compares to their acquisition in English. A structuralist theory assumes there is a reason to compare the lexical rules with one another apart from the syntactic rules. A functionalist theory would not make such a distinction; it would only assume that these were four distinct rules with four distinct functions. It is not even worth asking in general how the acquisition of lexical rules compares with the acquisition of syntactic rules in a functionalist theory.

Another problem I face in making a comparison between English and K'iche' is that K'iche' speakers use the passive voice more frequently than English speakers. There is no reason to associate differences in frequency exclusively with functionalist theories. Structuralist

theories also predict that the frequency of any given form will reflect its use in different contexts. What functionalist theories need to show is that they make predictions that are attributable to differences in function, not frequency. The more frequent use of nonactive voices by K'iche' caretakers is correlated with their more frequent usage by K'iche' children. A rough comparison of the frequency of passives in English and K'iche' is shown in (8)

(8) Comparison of passive frequencies in English and K'iche'

English (from Pinker, Lebeaux & Frost, 1987)

Children	Ages	MLU	Hours Recorded	No. of Passives
Adam	2;3-4;11	2.00-5.20	110	72
Eve	1;6-2;3	1.50-4.26	40	10
Sarah	2;3-5;1	1.74-4.10	139	32
Allison	1;5-2;10	1.73	4	2

K'iche'

Al Tiyaan	2;1-2;10	1.07-3.30	16	19
Al Chaay	2;9-3;6	1.57-4.31	24	99
A Carlos	3;0-3;10	1.59-3.69	20	68

Van Valin (1987) provides the clearest discussion of voice acquisition from the standpoint of a functional theory of grammar. Foley & Van Valin's (1984) Role and Reference Grammar (RRG)

distinguishes between two types of "subjects" (they use the term 'syntactic pivot'). Some languages select subjects solely on the basis of the np's semantic features. Other languages select subjects on the basis of the pragmatic/discourse features of the nps. One characteristic of languages with pragmatic subjects is a passive or antipassive construction that changes the semantic role of the subject. Both English and K'iche' are languages with pragmatic subjects.

Van Valin claims that RRG predicts children would first fail to distinguish between the different semantic roles of a pragmatic subject. They would treat all languages as though they contained only semantic subjects. This, he states, accounts for the failure of children learning English 'to comprehend passives correctly for a considerable period of time'. He contrasts the acquisition of the passive in English with the acquisition of passives in Sesotho, a southern Bantu language (cf. Demuth 1989). Sesotho also has a pragmatic subject, but Van Valin states that the crucial feature of the subject in Sesotho is that it is always definite, referential and highly topical. Van Valin claims that this 'direct form-function correlation' is responsible for the appearance of full passives in children's speech as early as 2.8 years. Thus, the guiding acquisition principle for Van Valin is the same as Karmiloff-Smith's (1979) or Slobin's (1973) that one form should serve one function.

We can test Van Valin's proposal by seeing whether K'iche' subjects are always definite, referential and highly topical. If they are Van Valin predicts K'iche' children would use nonactive

voices as early as Sesotho-speaking children. If not, then K'iche' children should use nonactive voices as late as English-speaking children.

The first problem one faces in testing this assertion is knowing when subjects are sufficiently definite, referential and topical. Van Valin does not provide an explicit account. Evidently there are vast differences between English and Sesotho in this respect even though most of the subjects children learning English encounter are definite and highly topical. Van Valin notes that Sesotho does not permit Wh-phrases to occur in subject position. While it is acceptable to use a sentence in the active voice to ask about an object ('What did she use?'), questions about sentence subjects must be passivized ('It was used by whom?').

I infer from Van Valin's discussion that obligatory passivization of questions about sentence subjects is a necessary and sufficient criterion for deciding the degree of subject definiteness. This criterion is difficult to apply to K'iche' because questions about sentence subjects undergo the focus antipassive rather than passive alternation. One could assume that the antipassive was functionally equivalent to the passive in detransitivizing sentences. Alternatively, it is possible to maintain that the focus antipassive is functionally distinct from the passive in that it results in subject question sentences where the Wh-phrase is still a subject. I do not see any objective basis for choosing either alternative.



The disambiguating function of the nonactive voices in K'iche' suggests that there is no requirement that K'iche' subjects be definite, referential or highly topical. I list some sentences from a K'iche' text and from my transcripts of adult K'iche' speech in (9). Apparently it is not necessary that K'iche' subjects be definite.

(9) K'iche' sentences with indefinite subjects

K'iche' Text (Norman 1976)

3. xaq k'a te' xel la jun ayi:n pa le: ma:r.

Suddenly (there) came an alligator out of the ocean.

45. xa xinutij la jun ayi:n.

An alligator ate me.

98. xa: jun ayi:n xink'am-ow loq

Just an alligator brought-FOC<sub>AP</sub> me here.

K'iche' Transcripts

R1-33 N: k'o: jun iwich' katcha.

There is a little one you say.

R1-35 N: jachin ka'an-ow le: awa katcha chare.

Who makes-FOC<sub>AP</sub> your bread you say to him.

R1-60 N: k'o: jun ixpeg dih.

There is a toad dear.

I will end without making any claims about the acquisition of nonactive voice in K'iche'. I provide a list of the nonactive utterances the K'iche' subjects used in their transcripts in the appendix. Readers may decide for themselves whether they think K'iche' children use nonactive voices as early as Sesotho children or as late as English-speaking children. They may also check to see whether the children acquire the passives before or after the antipassives or whether they acquire the lexical passive<sup>2</sup> before or after the syntactic passive<sup>1</sup>. My own feeling is that they do use the various nonactive voice constructions productively at an early stage. I do not think they do so because these constructions serve any especially useful function, but because the forms are a salient part of the K'iche' input (cf. Pye 1980, 1983). I could be wrong, but it looks to me as though the structural characteristics of K'iche' (especially the syllable-final stress placement) conspire to promote the early use of the many nonactive voice forms. This is because the nonactive suffixes frequently appear as the final, stressed syllable of the verb where they may be especially salient to children. In this K'iche' provides an illuminating example of the interaction between form and function in language structure and language acquisition. No theory that is wholly structural or functional will successfully explain children's ability to acquire language.

Notes

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## Appendix

## Nonactive voices in K'iche' children's speech

Adult forms are shown in parentheses.

Al Tiyaan (2;1-2;10):

T2 'oh (xyow)	Focus Antipassive	'give'
T3 tiyonik in	Absolutive	'bite'
T7 nik (katoq'onik)	Absolutive	'sustain'
T8 t'enik (kaxet'onik)	Absolutive	n.t.**
T9 pa'ch (xpachik)	Passive1	'smash'
'anik (xaanik)	Passive1	'do'
T10 b'iix (xb'iix)	Passive1	'say'
pojonik (xpoqowik)	Focus Antipassive	'boil'
T12 tzijon (xtzijonik)	Absolutive	'talk'
T11 pax (xpaax)	Passive1	'smash'
sachik (xesachik)	Passive1	'forget'
xik (xtiixik) 2x	Passive1	'spill'
T13 chupik (xchuupik)	Passive1	'blow out'
toq'opinik (xtogopinik)	Absolutive	'break (thread)'
q'upinik (xqupinik)	Absolutive	'cut'
T14 paqinik (xpaq'inik)	Absolutive	'break (bone)'
t'ub'inik (xt'ub'inik)	Absolutive	'tear (clothing)'
raminik (xraminik)	Absolutive	'rip'
ketzijunik (ketzijonik)	Absolutive	'talk'

	qupin (xqupin)	Absolutive	'cut'
T15	yajan (xyajan)	Absolutive	'scold'
	ch'ayan (xch'ayan)	Absolutive	'hit'

Al Chaay (2;9-3;6)

R3	no Lin loq' (xloq'owik)	Focus Antipassive	'buy'
R4	pax weech (xsipax) 2x	Passive1	'give'
R5	wixtaj nah (wiyextaj) 2x	Emphatic	'wait'
	yox taj (kayox)	Passive1	n.t.
	chaap uj maal (xujchaap)	Passive1	'grab'
	tiiij maal chi (xtiiij rumal)	Passive1	'eat'
R6	wextaj nah (wiyextaj) 3x	Emphatic	'wait'
	looq' Xela (xlooq')	Passive1	'buy'
	jan a Xa7n (kayajan)	Absolutive	'scold'
R7	jan tat in (kayajan)	Absolutive	'scold'
	no loq'tajik (xloq'atajik)	Passive2	'buy'
R8	b'iix ak' (xb'iix)	Passive1	'said'
	no chuup chik (xchuup)	Passive1	'put out'
	no ah xik (kab'ixik)	Passive1	'said'
R9	k'an pin (xq'upinik)	Absolutive	'break (stick)
	kup, kupiiij (xqupix)	* Passive1	'cut'
	k'up jalom (xqupix)	Passive1	'cut'
	mer tiiij ab' ali7 (xtiiij)	Passive1	'eat'
R10	mera chi kaloq' (kaloq'ik)	Passive1	'buy'
	luk yaaj, yaaj Juan (xyaaj)	Passive1	'scold'



	tzilik tah (xutzirik)	Passive1	'cure'
	no chiit wach tukut (xch'iit)	Passive1	'scratch'
	yaa luk' manena (xyaa)	Passive1	'give'
	no miich' uwii7 (xmiich')	Passive1	'pull'
R11	looq' wach (xlooq')	Passive1	'buy'
R12	no awuxik mich' (kamich'on)	Absolutive	'pull'
	ch'akanik (xinch'akanik)3x	Absolutive	'win'
	tijtaj chi jun mal xirwel (xtijtaj)	Passive2	'eat'
R13	e mal cho (x'ee rumaal)	Active with <u>-umaal</u>	

A Carlos (3;0-3;9)

C1	tijtajik (xtijtajik)	Passive2	'eat'
	n kunax taj (kinkunax)	Passive1	'cure'
C2	chuupik (xchuupik)	Passive1	'blow out'
	lok'owik (xloq'owik)	Focus Antipassive	'buy'
C4	innimanik (kintz'iib'anik)	Absolutive	'write'
C6	paax (xpaax)	Passive1	'smash'
C7	chapik (xchapik) 2x	Passive1	'catch'
	sokotaj (xsokotaj taj)	Passive2	'wound'
	chupix (xchupix)	Passive1	'snuff'
	t'iisik (kat'iisik)	Passive1	'sew'
	kaayik (xch'aayik)	Passive1	'hit'
	jatanik (xjat'ixik)	Passive1	'tie'
C8	chaapik (xchaap) 2x	Passive1	'catch'
	at a7ayowik (xatyowik) 2x	Focus Antipassive	'give'
	tixik (katixik)	Passive1	'spill'

xib'inik (kaxib'inik)	Absolutive	'scare'
towik (xtowik)	Focus Antipassive	'hear'
ti7ik (xti7ik)	Passive1	'bite'
chuup (xchuup) 3x	Passive1	'blow out'
ka7appisik (kapisik)	Passive1	'wrap'
elaq'axik (xelaq'axik)	Passive1	'steal'

\*\* No translation.